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Mark Van Doren & American classicism

by [Jeffrey Hart](#)

A student and friend remembers the critic.

Above the columns of Butler Library at Columbia, inscribed in the stone frieze, you read permanent testimony that some writers are especially important: Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Plato, Aristotle, Milton, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Spinoza. The names represent importance itself. Butler Library gazes out across a series of walks and terraces at Charles McKim's Low Library, which dominates the scene with its ten Ionic columns and its low dome, inspired by the Pantheon in Rome.

To my undergraduate gaze, no professor was more in harmony with all this than Mark Van Doren. In our first acquaintance I was not aware of him as a distinguished scholar and critic of American literature (or as one, in many ways, who was quintessentially American). Soon I learned that he was a man of the Butler frieze, who had written that "a classic is always fresh, vernacular, sensible, and responsible," and who had elabor ...

Jeffrey Hart's most recent book is *The Making of the American Conservative Mind* (ISI).

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